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Zdenka Becker

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Writing Drama Today

Zdenka Becker

Much could be said about Writing Drama today, but I will try to stay very concrete.

I was born twice. Once as a little girl in Slovakia, a socialist country where people's heads had been filled with political propaganda and everybody said slogans that they didn't want to say. And the second time as an adult woman in a western European country, with the possibility to say what I wanted, but without a language which someone could understand.

This experience left a mark on me. I looked around and learned to live without words. Later I did everything I could to understand and to be understood.

18 years ago I started to write in German. I write about people from the east in a western language. I write about their feelings as they search to find a new home, new words, and new joys.

Theatre is a very good medium to narrate stories. The audience looks at the actors on the stage, laughs with them and cries with them and then at home recognizes that the play was about themselves. Theatre is a mirror of the present time and therefore I write stories from today about people from today.

In the last one hundred years borders in Europe moved very often. People lost their countries and were driven out of their homes; they were killed or imprisoned because of their religion. And the situation still goes on. Now we have a new Europe with new borders. I don't mean just geographically. I mean borders in hearts and heads which some people have still not overcome.

But these geographical and internal borders do provide new stories. I feel like a chronologist, who is looking for details. The big history is not my topic but rather smaller events that shed light on the larger screen of the situation. My stories tell about people who live in a certain political situation, which makes them who they are.

For me it is important to be genuine, to write about something that I really know and that moves me. I can invent stories, but not feelings.

I am not like other authors, who sit at the table and think about what they should write. I do not look for stories, stories look for me. Everyday. It is just one of the consequences of living in two worlds.

The beginning of each story is always true. Somebody says one sentence or something happens, some small event, and I have it. I have an idea, I have a theatre play. In one minute. In my head. But it is just a skeleton, which I need to cover with my story. To set it in the right place, at the right time, with characters who can transport my message.

The first draft I write over the course of a few days. Very quickly. And then I work with it sometimes for weeks, sometimes months, sometimes years. I work on dialogues, situations, inflections and gestures. Something for the ears, eyes and heart. And the figures start to live. They become more and more independent, they say and do what they need to say and need to do. I just accompany them on their way.

Ten of my plays have been performed. Usually on small and middle-sized stages and once on a big one. It is not easy to be played in Austria or in Germany. A very big part of the German speaking audience is very conservative. "Burgtheater" in Vienna is the most important theatre in Austria and one of the biggest and nicest in Europe. 90% of its program consists of classic authors such as Goethe, Grillparzer, and Shakespeare, with highlights like Ibsen, Nestroy or Ionesco.

The "Festspiele," Salzburg's legendary art festival, took place for the first time in 1920. In the same year the premiere of Hugo von Hofmannsthal "Jedermann" (*Everyone: The Life and Death of a Rich Man*) was first performed in front of Salzburg Cathedral. It has been performed every year since. For more than 80 years. And every year in Salzburg it is nearly the same audience and every year people say how up-to-date it was. How nice and beautiful. But this annual show of fashion and vanity is just a farce and not real theatre.

But where is the chance for writing drama today?

Very few contemporary Austrian writers will ever be played on a big Austrian stage. Peter Turrini, Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke and Elfriede Jelinek will be the only ones performed. Everybody in Europe knows these playwrights. But in Austria they will also be criticised. Often people go to these plays because they are looking for a scandal. And sometimes they get it.

I am lucky with my plays. I have found an audience that likes my themes and the way I narrate stories. I have found people who understand.